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ABSTRACT

The paper examines deaf people as a minority group from a community and cultural perspective. The nature and evaluation of the deaf community are considered, and four basic avenues to membership are noted: audiological, political, linguistic, and social. Distinctive features of the deaf culture are described, including its value system which emphasizes respect for American Sign Language, a general disassociation from speech, and the importance of touch and nonverbal behaviors. It is concluded that the deaf community has a proud cultural identity, with their own language, community, goals, values, and traditions. (CL)

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DEAFNESS: EXPLORATIONS INTO A COMMUNITY AND ITS CULTURE

Eastern Communication Association

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During the late 1960's and 1970's, the Civil Rights Movement affected the lives of a broad spectrum of people: ethnic minorities, women, and the physically impaired. The focus of this paper is to examine, from a community and a cultural perspective, a minority group that has evolved as a result of an audiological impairment. Prior to the political climate of the 1960's, deaf people were traditionally perceived from a clinical or pathological view -- a negative view which focused on the ways Deaf* people's behavior deviated from behaviors practiced by the Hearing majority. The cultural view of this group of people is the result of a relatively recent discovery of American Sign Language (ASL) as a separate language (not a visual form of English) coupled with increasing pride and group identity from within the Deaf Community. My presentation will include general information pertaining to the present-day attitude that the Deaf comunity is a cultural entity, having its own values, beliefs, distinctive world view and language.

Deaf persons usually experience their physical impairment most when interacting with persons who can hear, are not familiarized with sign language, and have difficulty understanding the deaf person's speech. The result of this type of interaction frequently results in mutual withdrawal and increasing misunderstandings. The Hearing society, generally speaking, has historically treated deaf people with barely disguised hostility and/or paternalism. The former is due to the frustrated and awkward communication and the latter to the hearing person's impression that the Deaf are intellectually inferior because of the hearing loss (Schein, 1968). In order

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*The words "Deaf" and "Hearing", when capitalized, refer to cultural associations.

to meet their social and communication needs, and to counter the disadvantages of being hearing-impaired in an audio-dependant society, the Deaf community evolved.

Sociologists define a community as a general social system in which a group of people live together, share common goals, and carry out certain responsibilities to each other (Padden, 1980). We often think in terms of geographical proximity as a feature of this operational definition. Such is not the case when discussing the Deaf community. Its boundaries are more often conceptual, rather than concrete. Deaf people find commonality of interests, language and identification despite great distances that may separate them. National meetings draw sizable proportions of the Deaf population. Local gatherings also attract deaf people from a wide radius (Schein, 1968). Both social and political organizations function as primary sources of information for their members. The National Association of the Deaf (N.A.D.), the first national organization of physically impaired persons in the United States, was founded in 1880 and is the largest consumer organization of and for hearing-impaired persons. Its goals include directing research, working to assure the r ghts of Deaf people in Congress, promoting Deaf awareness, and distributing literature and special appliances to members of the community. Almost every state has a National Association of the Deaf to service its members. Many area clubs and athletic organizations serve numberous recreational and social needs, making the Deaf clubs significant features of the community experience. It is at the clubs for the Deaf where ideas are exchanged, friendships formed, dances held, the latest happenings in the community are shared and where certain members emerge as leaders (Hairston and Smith, 1983).

The Deaf community is unlike an ethnic or religious community where it is relatively clear whether or not a person is a member, because membership within the Deaf community is not defined in terms of racial, ethnic or religious backgrounds. Thus far, researchers have been unable to single out any one distinguishing characteristic shared by all of its members other than hearing loss and/or knowledge of a manual mode of communication. Perhaps it should be mentioned here that not all hearing-impaired people necessarily advocate sign language and not all hearing-impaired people identify culturally with other Deaf people. A significant number of deaf individuals have formed organizations such as the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf and its affiliates promote oral skills which eliminate the use of signs and fingerspelling. Oral deaf individuals advocate lipreading, voice production and residual hearing to communicate with the hearing world and with one another. Their communal and cultural ties are with Hearing world. They define their deafness in terms of it being a pathological or clinical phenomenon - a handicapping deficiency - rather than a condition that is the basis for a cultural expression among other Deaf people. Hence, manual communications are not necessarily the common denominator for all hearing-impaired individuals. Rather, there is a complex set of factors that must be considered. Researchers at Gallaudet College have been able to describe four basic avenues to membership into the Deaf community. They are audiological, political, linguistic, and social (Baker and Cokely, 1980). A person may gain entrance into the community and become enculturated as a result of hearing loss through injury, illness, or birth: prevocational or congenital deafness. One may become an accepted member of the community because of his or her influence on political matters

that affect the community on a local, state, or national level. As is the case with many interested hearing people, a person may enter the community by taking sign classes and socializing with Deaf people. Hearing people may be accepted into the community, but are generally not considered "core members" of the Deaf community unless perhaps they have Deaf parents, and have been raised in the community and possess attitudinal Deafness. The major factor upon being accepted into the Deaf community is a person's attitude toward the group. As said previously, a hearing-impaired person who has been educated and raised in the Hearing world, may not have any interest in socializing or identifying culturally with Deaf persons.

A hearing loss does not automatically make individuals identify with the Deaf community or its culture. Children who are congenitally deaf and of Deaf parents are raised in a cultural environment with all of the learned mores and behaviors of the group. The children acquire native competence in American Sign Language, learn the values, rules for behavior and traditions taught to them by their parents. But deaf children of hearing parents, which is 90% of the deaf population according to research linguists at Gallaudet College (Baker and Cokely, 1980), are often "enculturated" into Deafness by their peers and Deaf role models in residential school settings.

One of the most distinctive characterisics of the Deaf culture is its value system. These values shape how Deaf people behave, what they believe in and how they react to the Hearing people. An all-important value of the Deaf culture is its respect for American Sign Language. Very briefly, American Sign Language (ASL or Ameslan) is a visual-gestural

language created by Deaf people - separate from the English language - and used by possibly as many as 500,000 people throughout the United States and Canada. The units of ASL consist of specific facial and body movements and hand shapes. These movements and shapes serve as words and intonations of the language (Baker and Cokely, 1980). American Sign Language, used within the Deaf culture, has its linguistical foundation partially in French Sign Language, as opposed to English, as one might assume. At the turn of the 19th century, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc, a deaf educator from France, established the first American school for the deaf in Hartford, Connecticut. Many of the indigenous signs used by the Deaf Americans then are present today in different parts of our country, while other original signs have evolved into different shapes or changed from two hand configurations into one. Deaf students during the early 1800's received manual instruction in old French Sign Language, introduced to them by Clerc, and in their native language. This amalgomation has evolved into American Sign Langauge used among Deaf people today. Unlike the existing language variations and available avenues of entrance into the Deaf community, core membership into the cultural experience is more closed. Language within the culture is generally restricted to ASL. However, language usage in the community is a bit more flexible, allowing ASL, voice, lip movements, pidgin signed English (PSE) and a variety of other manual codes. Traditionally, educators and professionals have had negative attitudes about ASL, in part because it was not recognized as being a legitimate language. The mainstream attitude was that ASL was poor, or broken English (Woodward, 1982). Therefore, Deaf students were discouraged and even punished if caught using their native language in much the same way that the American Indians were forbidden from using their original language

when attending school systems controlled by the dominant cultural group. Residential schools for the deaf are controlled by the Hearing community. Despite opposition by Hearing people and oral-deaf people to suppress ASL, and despite the fact that most of the deaf students' education focuses on the learning of English, ASL remains as a legitimate means of communicating within the Deaf culture. Professor of Linguistics at Gallaudet College, James Woodward, in 1975 suggested three reasons for the survival of ASL despite the pressures of the dominant society. He postulated that oppression confronting the Deaf community may actually have caused its members to unite more strongly, feeling the need to defend their communication rights. Secondly, because Deaf people have hearing losses, they naturally gravitate towards a language which is structured for visual rather than auditory processing. According to Woodward, a third and fascinating reason for the survival of ASL centers on the fact that Deaf people rarely use it with hearing signers (Baker and Cokely, 1980). The Deaf communicate with majority cultural members by using signs in English word-order -- Pidgin signing. It is a visual system; but, it is not ASL. Thereby, they secure group identity, protect their language and maintain ethnic and communicative boundaries by generally not using ASL with outsiders. ASL is perceived as a medium for intimate interaction among the core members. Hearing outsiders, who have developed a fluency in signing and are culturally sensitive to Deafness, are aware of the polarization that exists between the Hearing society and the bilingual-Deaf community. Deaf and Hearing people communicate on a language continuum: ASL at one end and English at the other. The issue of language manipulation by Hearing people and the struggle for native language legitimacy are

topics having historical implications that remain unresolved today. By using Pidgin Signed English (PSE), the communication process allows for information to be shared, and Deaf cultural identity is maintained. Pidgin Signed English (PSE) has developed within the Deaf community as a natural consequence of two different languages in contact and/or conflict with one another. PSE is neither English nor American Sign Language. It is a visual system that has emerged with certain elements of both. Most often, within the bilingual Deaf community, Hearing and Deaf signers interact through the use of PSE. Pidgin signing is not intended to model or change either language; its purpose is to facilitate intercultural communications. And for this reason, the Deaf community appears to accept it as a viable means of lessening communication barriers that exist between the two groups.

Even though there are those Deaf people who can hear sounds, and some speak very clearly, there is a general disassociation from speech within the Deaf culture. Children raised in the culture are often trained to limit mouth movement unless it is part of ASL. With the increased use, however, of Pidgin Sign English within the community, this attitude is changing somewhat. Mouth movement is more acceptable now, but exaggerated movement while signing still is not. Since speech has traditionally been forced on Deaf people as a substitute for their language, it carries with it negative connotations for the core members.

Nonverbal behaviors between the Deaf and Hearing cultures differ significantly and contribute to the misunderstandings between the groups. In the American Hearing culture, for example, people are taught that staring is inappropriate behavior and that tactile behavior is to be kept

at a minimal in public settings. In ASL conversation, the listener is expected to watch the face of the signer throughout the conversation. Breaking eye contact too soon may hurt the interaction, communicating a lack of interest, or may be considered rude behavior. Touch, whether that be self-touching or physical contact with another person, is an integral component of the communication process. Facial expressions and body gestures among hearing people are typically restrained as compared to that exhibited by deaf people. Nonverbal behaviors play a major role in ASL in that it totally regulates conversations and is an integral part of the language's grammatical structure.

Knowing what to call oneself with the Deaf culture is important. In the Hearing culture, it is desirable to distinguish between the degree of hearing loss. Hard-of-hearing is more valued. But among Deaf people, the distinctions between hearing loss are not considered important for group relations. "Deaf" is not a clinical definition of one's hearing loss. It is a label which identifies the persons as belonging to the group. It is what is meant by attitudinal Deafness. The term "Hearie" is the label given to outsiders by members of the Deaf culture. The term has negative connotations and is used to ridicule and ostracize people. Hearing-impaired persons who communicate negative feelings about Deaf people and/or who depend largely on residual hearing and voice are often criticized in this manner within residential school settings.

To hearing outsiders, Deaf people may appear as a group of handicapped individuals who use their hands to communicate because of their inability to speak or hear. but a closer examination reveals a proud cultural entity: people with their own language, community, goals, values and traditions

passed down from one generation to the next. They are a misunderstood people, having been labeled handicapped and viewed as being inferior by the Hearing majority. Deafness is not only synonymous with hearing loss; it connotes a cultural group's commitment to preserve its language and its culture. Being Deaf is a misunderstood and often ignored co-cultural phenomenon that provides a strong political and social challenge for the Hearing culture. Continued investigative research is needed in this area to explain this co-cultural phenomenon linguistically, as well as culturally. Ethnographic investigations and observations have been useful in generating research questions and providing information that reflects the complex nature of the Deaf culture. One particular interest that is receiving increased attention is the plight of Black Deaf Americans. This minority group and others that make up the Deaf community need to be investigated further in order for educators and professionals to better service their specific needs.

I have merely touched the surface of this cultural frontier, and hope that this brief introduction into Deafness provided you with some basic information that will encourage continued discussion on this topic and stimulate further inquiry.

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